

MEET THE... BANTU

The migration of Bantu-speaking peoples had significant impact on Africa's environment by facilitating the transmission of iron technologies and agricultural techniques in Sub-Saharan Africa. Their migration also led to the diffusion of Bantu languages throughout Sub-Saharan Africa – most notably as an important root of Swahili in eastern Africa.

HIGHLIGHTS:

CLAIM TO FAME: Spread CROPS, IRON, & LANGUAGE in Africa

CHRONOLOGY: 3000 BCE – 1000 CE, with peak 1000 BCE – 500 CE (Classical Age)

ORIGIN: Highland Forests of NIGERIA

In studying Africa, historians noticed that, with a few exceptions, all the languages spoken south and east of present-day Nigeria are closely related. By comparison the Romance languages of Europe cover only a fraction of that continent, whereas in southern Africa languages of comparable degree of similarity cover an area much larger than Europe. This language family is referred to as Bantu.

The Bantu were yam and oil palm farmers from the forests of present-day Nigeria. With the higher population that results from agriculture, Bantu farmers gradually new sought croplands around 3000 BCE. Initially migrating only a couple of kilometers per decade, in time the Bantu displaced nearly all of the foraging populations of Sub-Saharan Africa. During this expansion, the Bantu helped establish the practice of agriculture in regions of Africa where previously it hadn't been utilized. As the forest-oriented Bantu reached the unfamiliar grasslands of eastern Africa, their standard crop repertoire of yams and oil palm would not grow in less predictable rainfall. Here, the Bantu adapted by learning grain farming, cattle raising, and fishing techniques from the indigenous Africans.

As a result of the Bantu establishing agriculture and common language across Sub-Saharan Africa, two major innovations appeared during course of the Bantu expansion – iron working and the banana. Iron was developed by Hittites in 1200 BCE and spread to Africa via the Nile River and Trans-Saharan trade routes by 500 BCE. Archaeological evidence suggests that iron was also independently discovered in eastern Africa during this period. Regardless of origin, this revolutionary innovation not only made farming easier and militaries more effective, but iron would have been particularly important to the Bantu for its use in clearing trees for more farmland. At roughly the same time that iron entered the scene, the banana was introduced to eastern Africa. With cloudy origins, it is most likely that the banana was introduced from across the Indian Ocean as an outgrowth of Polynesian migrations. Highly productive, the banana would have transformed the forests of Africa allowing must higher population densities than from the more modest yam.

The Bantu expansion forever changed Sub-Saharan Africa by causing the spread of agriculture and a common language family. With the basic building blocks of civilization in place, Bantu expansion was intensified by the concurrent diffusion of iron technology and banana cultivation. With these changes, Africa developed more complex political systems and the churning of the forest floors likely fostered the spread of the malaria-bearing mosquitoes.

